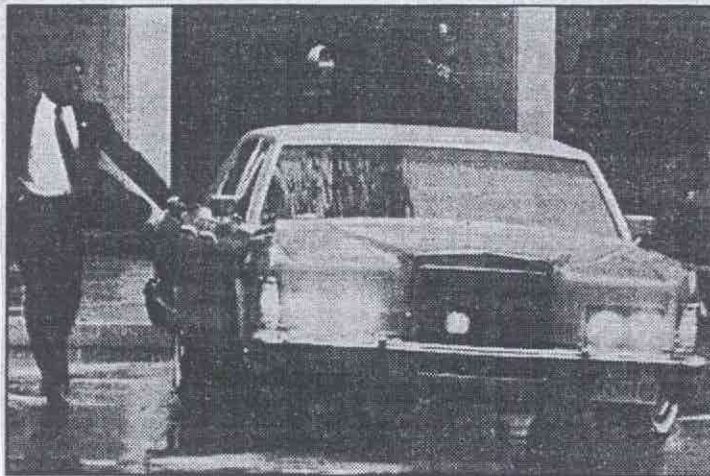




This heavily armored, bulletproof — and closed — limousine used by President Reagan in 1981 is in stark contrast to the open convertible used by President Kennedy in Dallas in 1963.

Armored limousines

Open cars are a thing of the past

By David Barry
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When John F. Kennedy was assassinated in the back seat of an open convertible, the tragedy ended an era of open cars that had put the president on display.

The four-door Lincoln Continental in which Kennedy met his death was long and low, with an elegant shape that had won a design award in 1961. Informal accessibility was part of the Kennedy image, and it was typical that the car's plexiglass shield — for protection against weather and other disturbances — was not in use on the Lincoln that day in Dallas.

The tradition of visibility in a presidential parade car dates back to Franklin Roosevelt, who

made ceremonial appearances in a specially modified 1939 Lincoln V12 roadster, nicknamed "The Sunshine Special."

President Dwight Eisenhower rode in a 1950 Lincoln convertible, with a clear, plexiglass protective bubble-shield, which brought the car the name "bubble-top."

The bubble-top Lincoln was retired in 1960, and a 1961 Lincoln Continental four-door convertible, a new model that year, was modified for presidential use. In addition to its removable plexiglass weather shield, the rear seat could be hydraulically raised 10 inches — to better display the president and his guests.

The Kennedy car, its length-

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ened wheelbase and extensive modifications adding greatly to its weight, was known as X-100 to the Secret Service, which operated it under lease from Ford Motor Co. Its removable plexiglass shield, though — like the shield on the earlier Eisenhower Lincoln — was not bulletproof.

After the assassination, the X-100 was extensively modified for security in a redesign that took almost a year to complete.

The re-engineered car was then put back into presidential service, thoroughly armor-plated and bulletproofed.

Converted to a closed car, the newly rebuilt Lincoln featured bulletproof windows of 1-inch-thick glass. The car was then modified for President Lyndon Johnson so that one of its bulletproof rear windows could be rolled down.

It was modified again so President Richard Nixon and his guests could stand and be visible in parades through a slot that could be opened in the top. The car continued in use through the inauguration of President Jimmy

Carter before being retired for good.

When Carter came into office, a newer Lincoln was also in the White House fleet. This car, similar in appearance to the Kennedy Lincoln but heavily armored like the rebuilt Kennedy car, carried President Ronald Reagan to the scene of the assassination attempt by John W. Hinckley.

Reagan had the aging Lincoln replaced by a 1982 Cadillac limousine, heavily armored by Hess & Eisenhardt, the Cincinnati firm that has been building presidential cars since the Truman administration.

While the specifications of Hess & Eisenhardt security-modified vehicles are a closely guarded secret, it is well-known that the armoring and blast resistance keeps pace with modern weaponry.

Three former presidential Lincolns — Roosevelt's, Eisenhower's and Kennedy's — are on display in the Ford Museum in Dearborn, Mich. Each one makes a statement of style of the era it represents. The current blast-proof, bulletproof presidential Cadillac, like other cars used by modern heads of state around the world, is less an example of automotive style than a statement of the armorer's art.